

Theme: Dystopian Visions of the Future **Text:** *The Handmaid's Tale* (M. Atwood)

We turn our backs to the Wall, head left. Here there are several empty storefronts, their glass windows scrawled with soap. I try to remember what was sold in them, once. Cosmetics? Jewelry? Most of the stores carrying things for men are still open; it's just the ones dealing in what they call vanities that have been shut down.

5 At the corner is the store known as Soul Scrolls. It's a franchise: there are Soul Scrolls in every city center, in every suburb, or so they say. It must make a lot of profit.

The window of Soul Scrolls is shatterproof. Behind it are printout machines, row on row of them; these machines are known as Holy Rollers, but only among us, it's a disrespectful nickname. What the machines print is prayers, roll upon roll, prayers going out endlessly. They're ordered by Compuphone, I've overheard the
10 Commander's Wife doing it. Ordering prayers from Soul Scrolls is supposed to be a sign of piety and faithfulness to the regime, so of course the Commanders' Wives do it a lot. It helps their husbands' careers.

There are five different prayers: for health, wealth, a death, a birth, a sin. You pick the one you want, punch in the number, then punch in your own number so your account will be debited, and punch in the number of
15 times you want the prayer repeated.

The machines talk as they print out the prayers; if you like, you can go inside and listen to them, the toneless
15 metallic voices repeating the same thing over and over. Once the prayers have been printed out and said, the paper rolls back through another slot and is recycled into fresh paper again. There are no people inside the building: the machines run by themselves. You can't hear the voices from outside; only a murmur, a hum, like a devout crowd, on its knees. Each machine has an eye painted in gold on the side, flanked by two small golden
20 wings.

I try to remember what this place sold when it was a store, before it was turned into Soul Scrolls. I think it was lingerie. Pink and silver boxes, colored pantyhose, brassieres with lace, silk scarves? Something lost.

Ofglen and I stand outside Soul Scrolls, looking through the shatterproof windows, watching the prayers well
25 out from the machines and disappear again through the slot, back to the realm of the unsaid. Now I shift my gaze. What I see is not the machines, but Ofglen, reflected in the glass of the window. She's looking straight at me.

We can see into each other's eyes. This is the first time I've ever seen Ofglen's eyes, directly, steadily, not
30 aslant. Her face is oval, pink, plump but not fat, her eyes roundish.

She holds my stare in the glass, level, unwavering. Now it's hard to look away. There's a shock in this seeing;
35 it's like seeing somebody naked, for the first time. There is risk, suddenly, in the air between us, where there was none before. Even this meeting of eyes holds danger. Though there's nobody near.

At last Ofglen speaks. "Do you think God listens," she says, "to these machines?" She is whispering: our
habit at the Center.

In the past this would have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. Right now it's
35 treason.

I could scream. I could run away. I could turn from her silently, to show her I won't tolerate this kind of talk
in my presence. Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one.

I steel myself. "No," I say.

Annotations:

3 *vanities* – things that are now considered worthless **5** *franchise* - permission given (here) by the government of Gilead to someone who wants to sell a special service **37** *sedition* - speech, writing, or actions intended to encourage people to disobey a government

Assignments:

1. What changes have taken place in the public and private lives of Gileadeans according to Offred's account?

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2. Analyse the language and other literary means that Atwood uses to give the readers her evaluation of life in Gilead. [Analysis]

3. *Satire is a form of writing in which societal practises are ridiculed to expose vice or folly.* Which current trends are being ridiculed in "Handmaid's Tale"? Take the extract above as a starting point for your answer. [Comment]